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THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS:

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

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In the wake of the the recently signed INF agreement on medium- and shorter-range missiles deployed mostly in Europe, attention will shortly turn to other classes of missiles, specifically strategic nuclear arms, and what can be done to reduce their numbers.

As we consider what constitutes stable reductions, it's worth studying the role we expect nuclear missiles to play in our strategic relationship with the Soviet Union. Fortunately, having just passed the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it's a timely moment to examine what historians and policy makers have considered its key lessons and how they relate to the issues of nuclear weapons today.

One of the most important lessons learned then and still relevant today is what President Kennedy called "the first direct test" between the Soviet Union and the United States involving the political utility of nuclear weapons. What makes this issue interesting today is that many of the leading participants on the American side have, since those weeks in October 1962, switched their views on the nuclear question. From considering nuclear weapons capable of exerting strong pressure on the Soviets -- enough, in fact, to force concessions from the Kremlin -- they now denigrate the leverage that nuclear weapons exerted at the time.

WHAT WAS THOUGHT DURING THE CRISIS

One of the most accepted points among President Kennedy's aides during the crisis was that America's nuclear superiority gave the U.S. political and military leverage over the Soviets. This position was put forth in three ways, each showing that key officials acknowledged this role for nuclear weapons.

1.) The Threat of War

Most fundamentally, many of Kennedy's top aides recognized that the clearest signal that the U.S. could send the Soviets at the time was that any resistance to meeting America's demands would necessarily risk war.

- o Once the CIA reported that some of the missiles on the island were operational (Oct. 27), Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara insisted that: "We must now be ready to attack Cuba ... Invasion had become almost inevitable."
- o Even more emphatic was General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who argued that "We have the strategic advantage in our general war capabilities ... This is not time to run scared."

In other words, both advisers appeared to argue that the U.S., in order to protect its supreme national interests, would have to assume the greatest of risks, including the chance of a nuclear exchange.

2.) The Fear of Escalation

Not only did Kennedy's aides willingly assume the risk of war in order to protect America's interests, but they also threatened Moscow with the full devastation of the U.S. arsenal when it refused to abandon its threatening position. It was only these actions, they concluded, that would force Khrushchev to back down.

- o Dean Rusk, Secretary of State under Kennedy, said on October 16, that "I think we'll be facing a situation that could well lead to general war."
- o During the postmortem that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara gave to a congressional committee in 1963, he concluded that Soviet leader Khrushchev:

"knew without any question whatsoever that he faced the full military power of the United States, including its nuclear weapons ... We faced that night the possibility of launching nuclear weapons and Khrushchev knew it, and that is the reason, and the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons." (emphasis added).

3.) Increasing the Pressure

Carrying this assumption of risk one step further, American officials conscientiously moved closer to war in order to increase the likelihood that Moscow would read the nuclear threat as credible.

- o On October 16, Secretary McNamara made perfectly clear the extent to which the U.S. should make war preparations: "All of our forces should be put on alert, but beyond that, mobilization, redeployment, movement and so on." (emphasis added).
- o The intended effect of this strategy was presented by Air Force General David Burchinal, who after the crisis explained how the U.S. clearly signaled its intentions to the Soviets:

"We increased airborne alert force of B-52s up to a third of the force. We had SAC bombers on nuclear alert with weapons in the bomb-bays on civilian airfields all over the airports all over the country ... All these moves were signals the Soviets could see and we knew they could see them. We got

everything we had, in the strategic forces, nuclear forces, counted down and ready and aimed and we made damn sure they saw it ..." (emphasis added).

WHAT THE OFFICIALS NOW SAY

Today, many of the people cited above now see the past very differently. Before considering the reasons for this change, let's examine some of today's more often quoted comments.

- o McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser, has insisted that America's nuclear superiority at the time "was not a usable superiority in the sense that we would ever want to go first because if even one Soviet weapon landed on an American target, we would all be losers."
- o General Maxwell Taylor wrote a few years ago that "Our great superiority in nuclear weapons contributed little to the outcome of the Cuba crisis."
- o In a 1983 discussion of the crisis, Dean Rusk said that "The simple fact is that nuclear power does not translate into usable political influence."
- o During that same discussion, McNamara argued that America's nuclear superiority "was not such that it could be translated into usable military power to support political objectives."

WHICH POSITION TO BELIEVE?

No one would deny that America's overwhelming conventional superiority in the region contributed to the outcome of the crisis. But neither should anyone deny that, as these participants made clear at the time, nuclear forces were also effective instruments for dealing with the Soviets. As Richard Betts, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, writes in his recent book Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance,

"If the imbalance of conventional forces in the Caribbean was the determinant of the outcome in Cuba, as is often asserted, there is no good explanation for why the Soviets did not counter the U.S. naval blockade with a blockade of Berlin, where the conventional imbalance was reversed."

Betts also makes clear how we can treat these reversals of position. "In light of the actual record these recollections -- perhaps dimmed by time, conceivably colored subconsciously by subsequent developments -- appear to be half-truths." The best that can be said about these recantations years after the fact is that, as Betts writes, "U.S. leaders may not have recognized,

agreed about, or relied consciously on an advantage inherent in numerical superiority. But they acted as if they did." (emphasis added).

According to many defense strategists, at issue is an ongoing debate over the role of nuclear weapons versus conventional weapons in military confrontations. In their retrospective writings, most of these players are arguing the case that we cannot and should not rely on nuclear coercion to effect desired results. Instead, so the argument goes, conventional capabilities are the only instrument available to military planners. The best way to judge the validity of this claim is to examine just what influenced the Soviets at the time.

WHY DID RUSSIA NOT ESCALATE THE CRISIS?

There is, of course, no way to get inside the Kremlin's document room to see what their participants thought and said during the crisis. What we can do is look at the decisions taken in Moscow and how they were affected by what the U.S. did at the time.

As General Burchinal's comments cited above indicate, the U.S. made a formidable show of its strength during the crisis. Most importantly, on October 24 the Strategic Air Command moved up to DEFCON 2 -- which meant the level just below deployment for combat. With all these preparations made in order to demonstrate American resolve to the Soviets, how did the Russians respond? Even more to the point, did Moscow find credible America's nuclear threats?

During the crisis, the CIA prepared a daily memorandum on the responses that Russia made to every U.S. move. The key point to emerge is that the Soviets never did anything, including putting some of their bombers on alert, to reduce the vulnerability of their strategic forces. The conclusion that many have drawn is that their strategic inferiority had a powerful effect on them, sufficient to deter them from taking a single move that might provoke the U.S.

General Burchinal has aptly summed the effective coercion of America's nuclear forces by saying that Khrushchev "never alerted a bomber or changed his own military posture one bit. We had a gun at his head and he didn't move a muscle." In this light, the infamous remark of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kuznestov to John McCloy shortly after the crisis -- "You Americans will never be able to do this to us again" -- makes perfect sense. Further evidence that bears out this precise point is in a recent biography of Fidel Castro (Fidel: A Critical Portrait by Tad Szulc), which includes an interview describing how the Soviets told Castro that U.S. nuclear superiority was the reason they withdrew the missiles.

LESSONS FOR TODAY

A reasonable conclusion from the above evidence is that America's nuclear superiority at the time was a significant factor during the crisis. So although the U.S. apparently lacks both the capability and intention of again taking advantage of its nuclear weapons in the same way, it should be wary of letting the reverse happen. That is, there is no reason why the U.S. one day could not find itself backed into a corner by Soviet nuclear intimidation. The missile crisis teaches us that nuclear weapons do have this capability.

Such concerns, moreover, are not empty. According to Soviet Military Power 1987, the Russian's highly accurate SS-18 ICBMs carry larger MIRVS than the Peacekeeper, the most modern deployed U.S. ICBM. The SS-18 was designed to attack and destroy ICBMs and other hardened targets in the U.S., and, according to Defense estimates, could take out 65 to 80 percent of US ICBM silos using two nuclear warheads against each. In addition, the Soviets maintain the world's largest ballistic missile submarine force. When these offensive forces are added to their extensive strategic air defense system, including the world's only operational ABM system around Moscow, it's apparent that the USSR presents a formidable nuclear threat to the U.S.

CONCLUSION

On October 16, 1962, Dean Rusk summed up what was on most people's mind at the time: "One thing Mr. Khrushchev may have in mind is that ... he knows that we have a substantial nuclear superiority, but he also knows that we don't really live under fear of his nuclear weapons to the extent that ... he has to live under fear of ours." While no U.S. official could make such a statement about the Soviet Union today, America's national interest, especially with regard to any future arms control agreements, should be in ensuring that no Soviet official could ever confidently make such pronouncements about the U.S.